

Foreword

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FOREWORD

The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross has always been contingent on the international situation. Consequently, it is not surprising that, faced with the worsening relations between and within States characteristic of this troubled period of history, the ICRC was again confronted in 1982 with numerous emergencies requiring more frequent humanitarian intervention. It should be stated straight away that the ICRC would never have been capable of undertaking so much, had it not been able to count on the active support of many National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, as well as on the financial and material aid of the international community.

However, the protection and assistance action which the ICRC sought to develop on behalf of the civilian and military victims of armed conflicts, was not always as far-reaching and effective as it would have wished. Although the four 1949 Geneva Conventions have been signed by almost all States, they have sometimes been gravely violated, the authorities concerned either taking refuge behind specious arguments in order to refute the applicability of the law, or openly infringing it, on the pretext that the imperatives of security are incompatible with the demands of humanity. In each of these situations, the ICRC increased its efforts, discreetly of course, but firmly, in order to obtain the necessary improvements.

These violations also highlighted the importance of making the rules of international humanitarian law and the principles governing the work of the Red Cross better known and understood by both the armed forces and the general public. Consequently, the ICRC is determined in future to intensify their dissemination, in close collaboration with the other constituent bodies of the International Red Cross, i.e. the League of Red Cross Societies and all recognized National Societies.

Parallel with its operational activities in 1982, the ICRC pursued its efforts to speed up ratification of the two 1977 Protocols by those States which have signed the Geneva Conventions. As at 31 December 1982, less than 20 per cent of all States had taken this step. This proportion is way below the ICRC's expectations, for the new rules introduced by the Protocols are more necessary than ever to ensure better protection of the victims of armed conflicts, and especially civilian populations, so cruelly hit by modern warfare.

Lastly, the ICRC cannot pass over in silence its grave anxiety concerning the financing of those activities it is bound by the Geneva Conventions to pursue on behalf of the tens of thousands of prisoners of war detained by Iran and Iraq. The contributions of the signatory States for this action are, in fact, very inadequate. The ICRC has itself had to contribute, from its meagre reserves, the amount of six million Swiss francs, as at 31 December 1982, putting the already precarious financial balance of the organization gravely in jeopardy. Worse still, it forces the ICRC to tighten the budgets of other regions, thus reducing its aid to other victims, in order to make up, as far as possible, for the deficit created by the Iran-Iraq operation. Although States are free to engage their sympathies where they may, the ICRC itself cannot choose among the victims it is obliged to care for according to its mandate. In keeping with the principle of impartiality governing its work, the ICRC makes no distinction between nationalities, races, religions, social conditions or political convictions. It simply strives to relieve individuals of as much of their suffering as possible, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

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